

## WHAT SHOULD BE CLEAR AS DAY

A sermon by Galen Guengerich  
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If the name W.H. Auden isn't a familiar part of your lexicon of the arts, let me explain his status this way: in the English-speaking world, Auden was the Tom Brady of 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry. Even if Auden wasn't the greatest of all time, as many football pundits consider Brady to be, many literary critics consider Auden the greatest of his time.

Make no mistake: I'm no fan of the New England Patriots – nor of the Los Angeles Rams, for that matter. But the one thing that saved last Sunday's Super Bowl from being the most boring of all time was the clash of ages. The game pitted a 66-year-old head coach and a 41-year-old quarterback against a 33-year-old head coach and a 24-year-old quarterback. For my part, I'm not-so-secretly pleased that experience turned out to matter after all.

Whether you love Tom Brady or despise him, it's arguably true that when the hour is late, and the stakes are high, and the odds are not in your favor, there's no one better to quarterback your team. The same is true of W.H. Auden. If you find yourself in pain, or bereft, or worried, or discouraged, there's no one's poems better to read.

If you're feeling uncertain, Auden offers encouragement in his poem titled "Leap before You Look":

The sense of danger must not disappear:  
The way is certainly both short and steep,  
However gradual it looks from here;  
Look if you like, but you will have to leap.

If you wonder why others aren't more attentive to your pain, Auden explains why in a poem titled, "Musee des Beaux Arts":

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position: how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.

If your love for someone isn't being returned in the way you would like, Auden offers this response in a poem titled "The More Loving One":

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well  
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,  
But on earth indifference is the least  
We have to dread from man or beast.  
How should we like it were stars to burn  
With a passion for us we could not return?  
If equal affection cannot be,  
Let the more loving one be me.

If you find yourself wondering how things will turn out, Auden explains that none of us can predict the future in these lines from one of his best-known poems:

Time will say nothing but I told you so  
Time only knows the price we have to pay;  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

If you find yourself depressed about the state of the world, Auden offers encouragement in his poem titled “September 1, 1939.” You may recall that the decade of the 1930’s began with an economic crash, plunging the world into an abyss of unemployment and poverty that became Great Depression. The decade ended with Hitler’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, marking the outbreak of what became World War II. After acknowledging the waves of anger and fear that circulate over the earth, along with the odor of death, Auden ends his poem with these words:

Defenceless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.

The through-line in Auden’s poetry, as well as in his life, appears in his poem titled “Canzone,” part of which served as the text for our second hymn today. Auden writes:

When shall we learn, what should be clear as day,

We cannot choose what we are free to love?...  
We are created from and with the world  
To suffer with and from it day by day.

“We are created from and with the world,” Auden insists, “to suffer with and from it day by day.” Auden wrote these words in 1941. They form a thematic backdrop for the text Auden wrote the following year for the composer Benjamin Britten’s exquisite and challenging *Hymn to St. Cecelia*, which Alejandro, Trent, and the All Souls Choir performed beautifully for us this morning.

Auden and Britten had collaborated before, but Auden had grown impatient with Britten’s fondness for middle-class comforts and his refusal to embrace the chaotic and sometimes ugly side of life. “Wherever you go,” Auden wrote in a letter to Britten, “you are and probably always will be surrounded by people who adore you, nurse you, and praise everything you do... You are always tempted to make things too easy for yourself, to build yourself a warm nest of love by playing the lovable, talented little boy.” Auden went on to say in his letter that if Britten wanted to achieve his full stature as an artist, he needed to open himself to the suffering of the world.

This suggestion takes center stage in Auden’s text for the *Hymn to St. Cecelia*. According to an ancient Roman legend, Cecelia was born to Roman nobility. As a child, she vowed her virginity to God. When she was married against her will to a pagan Roman nobleman, she refused to participate in her wedding celebration. She then expanded her protest by distributing her possessions to the poor. Enraged by her obstinance, the Roman officials ordered her to be killed.

Auden apparently chose to highlight St. Cecelia’s story in his collaboration with Britten partly because Britten had been born on St. Cecelia’s feast day, but also because she demonstrated the kind of selfless commitment to God and to others that Auden himself championed. “O bless the freedom that you never chose,” Auden writes in the final section of the St. Cecilia poem, “O wear your tribulation like a rose.” While tribulation itself is rarely beautiful, our response to it can be.

In these lines, and in the story of St. Cecelia, we hear an echo of the lines Auden had written the previous year:

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We cannot choose what we are free to love?...  
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Auden not only placed these words at the center of his poetic imagination, he also placed them at the center of his daily life. Several years ago, Edward Mendelson, who has written extensively about Auden and also edited Auden’s *Collected Poems*, wrote an article for the *New York Review of Books* titled, “The Secret Auden.”

Mendelson writes, “W.H. Auden had a secret life that his closest friends knew little or nothing about. Everything about it was generous and honorable. He kept it secret because he would’ve been ashamed to have been praised for it.” Mendelson learned about this secret life, he says, from chance encounters with people who had known Auden or from documents he discovered in Auden’s papers.

Shortly after the end of World War II, for example, Auden contacted a European relief agency, asked them to select two war orphans, and said he would pay their schooling costs through college. This arrangement continued with subsequent sets of orphans until Auden’s death in 1973. No one but the agency and the orphans knew until Mendelson discovered evidence of the payments.

During the 1950s, Auden attended an Episcopal church on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, St. Mark’s in the Bowery. Auden learned that an elderly woman in the congregation was suffering from night terrors. To comfort her, Auden took a blanket from his own home and slept in the hallway outside her apartment until she felt safe again.

Upon learning that a friend needed a medical operation that he couldn’t afford, Auden invited the friend to dinner. Auden never mentioned the operation during dinner, but as the friend was leaving, Auden handed him a large notebook containing the manuscript of *The Age of Anxiety*, one of his major works. “I want you to have this,” Auden said to his friend. Soon thereafter, the University of Texas bought the notebook, which enabled Auden’s friend to have the operation.

Mendelson gives one final example, which illustrates Auden’s willingness to appear selfish even when he wasn’t. Auden had co-translated the libretto of Mozart’s opera, *The Magic Flute* for an NBC Television production. One day, he stormed into the producer’s office and demanded to be paid immediately, rather than waiting until the date specified in his contract. He reportedly made himself unpleasant until someone finally wrote the check.

When the canceled check was returned to NBC, someone noticed that Auden had endorsed it, “Pay to the order of Dorothy Day.” The New York City Fire Department had ordered Day to make costly repairs to a homeless shelter she managed, and it would have been shut down if she had failed to come up with the money. Auden found the money without telling anyone why.

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Auden lived by this mantra, and his poetry encourages us to do the same. At its best, poetry challenges us to be our best. The purpose of poetry isn’t merely to inform, or instruct, or explain, or even entertain. Its purpose is to inspire — inspire us to feel alive, open ourselves, and take risks. Good poetry changes us and thereby changes the world.

Auden's poetry encourages us to take the leap when we're feeling hesitant. It encourages us to be the more loving one when others are acting indifferent. It encourages us to show an affirming flame in times of anger and despair. It encourages us to bless the freedom we never chose, and to wear our tribulation like a rose.